DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 194 FL 021 752

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TITLE Conciliating Communication, Culture, and Language Awareness.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 13p.; In Sarinee, Anivan, Ed. Language Teaching Methodology for the Nineties. Anthology Series 24; see FL 021 739.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communicative Competence (Languages); Discourse Analysis; Foreign Countries; *Grammar; *Intercultural Communication; *Language Patterns; *Metalinguistics; Oral Language; Second Language Instruction; *Second Language Learning; Written Language

ABSTRACT

It is argued that teaching and learning a second language for communicative competence should not lead to neglect of students' understanding of the way the language works, but rather should include constant development of language awareness. While use of the language in a variety of communicative activities is the central goal of instruction, discussion of how the language works as it does can enhance both comprehension and production. It is also proposed that the communicative approach need not be limited to oral communication, especially the everyday conversation that is commonly the focus of communicative instruction, to the exclusion of written discourse. Language awareness and written text can be productively integrated into a communicative activity. For example, students might be presented with a text, communicate about its content, and only after exploiting its communicative potential, be invited to observe language features at work in it. (MSE)

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CONCILIATING COMMUNICATION, CULTURE, AND LANGUAGE AWARENESS

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CONCILIATING COMMUNICATION, CULTURE AND LANGUAGE AWARENESS

Denis Girard

Long before the *communicative approach* for language teaching was launched in many countries throughout the world, *communication* was felt by a large number of linguists to be the "essential function" of language, to use the well-known phrase to be found in André Martinet's *Elément de linguistique générale*:

> "The essential function of the tool we call language is that of communication. French, for example, is first and foremost the tool which enables French-speakers to enter into an understanding with each other. We can see that if a language becomes modified in the course of time, it does so in order to satisfy the communication needs of the community that speaks it as economically as possible". (Martinet, 1960)

That quotation from a book published nearly thirty years ago is remarkable not only because of the importance attached to communication but also for its first reference to speakers' *needs*, what we now commonly call "language needs". But we must not ignore the fact that Martinet's concern was with general linguistics and not language teaching. His reference is to people who can already speak a language as their mother tongue, not to learners of a foreign language.

Other linguists went much further into the study of how language works as a tool for communication: J L Austin (1962) and J R Searle (1969) demonstrated "How to do things with words" and how to perform "speech acts". Then a few years later, it was an American sociolinguist, Dell Hymes, who invented and defined the new concept of "communicative competence" (Gumpertz and Hymes, 1972).

But the decisive role in applying these new ideas to language learning and teaching was to be played by the team of experts appointed by the Council of Europe, under the responsibility of Dr J L M Trim to "investigate the feasibility of a unit-credit system for modern languages in adult education". The seminal work accomplished during the decade 1971-1981 led to what came to be called the "Council of Europe Approach" which we must now quickly describe.

To be able to establish a "unit credit system" for language learning throughout Europe, one needed other criteria than purely linguistic ones (those given by

structuralism or even Chomsky's transformational grammar). Language universals had not been easy to discover through a formal analysis of languages and even more difficult to turn into practical purposes, for language teaching and learning. It was felt *language use* (what the average native language user *does* with the language when he communicates) was probably more important than *language usage* (the formal grammatical rules, however important they may be). Yet what we do with a language when we communicate with other members of our language community depends on a variety of factors connected with the situations in which the language is to be used (the roles played by the speakers, the settings, the topics) and also, of course, with the language activities concerned (involving the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing).

What came out as the "Council of Europe Approach" was a framework of principles on how to define concrete objectives for language learning whatever the language concerned (except of course when selecting the language items) but taking account of the kind of learner one was aiming at and his/her special *needs*. If we try to put it into a nutshell, the "systemic approach" we are referring to consists of:

- an assessment of learners' *needs* and *resources*
- a definition of *terminal objectives* in terms of what the learners will eventually be *able to do* with the new language (communicative *functions* and *notions*)
- an inventory of *linguistic contents* to be used as needed (grammar and vocabulary)
- an appropriate *methodology* involving the selection and use of teaching *materials* and *techniques*
- a constant *assessment* of the results obtained, allowing for permanent adaptation.

As a matter of fact, the expert group did not have enough time to deal with all the five elements of their systemic approach. What they produced, in the form of "threshold levels" (ie the first level of the projected "unit credit system"), was a new way of defining language learning contents through a comprehensive inventory of communicative functions and notions, starting with Jan van Ek's *Threshold Level for English*, *Un Niveau-seuil* for French and many other such studies for most European national and even regional languages.

Nothing was done to try and define a new methodology, although the emphasis put on communication in defining objectives was bound to lead to learning activities that would develop a communicative competence. That was the reason why the new Council of Europe project, No. 12, 1982-1988, was clearly labelled "Learning and teaching modern languages for communication". Among the studies carried out under the new modern languages project was one

I had proposed and was responsible for on "Selection and Distribution of Contents in Language Syllabuses", meant to establish the real impact of the Council of Europe on national and regional language syllabuses and, as a consequence, its effect on language teaching practices. Among the positive aspects of our findings, we mentioned "a constant and common desire for the reform of foreign language teaching/learning by striving to attain three objectives: (a) to develop the learner's communicative ability, (b) to inform him about the civilisation which the foreign language embodies and to instil in him a liking for it, (c) to develop his general education and training." (Girard, et al 1988)

What we felt to be less positive was perhaps an exaggerated faith in the new approach: "The communicative approach is going the same way as the structural-behaviourist audio-visual method: it is being seen by some people as a panacea." (Girard, et al 1988). The dangers of "pseudo-communication" are just as great when a learner is asked to express a non felt surprise or fear as when asked to produce a negative sentence with the modal "can" or "may".

A LANGUAGE FOR COMMUNICATION OR COMMUNICATING TO LEARN A LANGUAGE?

Bearing in mind the basic function of communication of language, it is difficult to imagine the teaching/learning of a modern language that would not give primary importance to building up communicative competence in the learner. It was only in the old days of the grammar/translation method, inherited from the teaching of Latin and Greek, that communicating in the language was not considered a worthwhile objective. Ever since the beginning of the direct method insisting on the use of the language by the learners and even more so with audio-oral and audio-visual methods, being able to speak the language has been the fundamental aim, best illustrated by the motto "Teach the language, not about the language".

Yet language teaching still needed the help of fundamental sociolinguistic research to understand clearly what communication really meant. W Rivers was one of the first applied linguists to warn us against the dangers of "pseudo-communication" as opposed to real communication (Rivers, 1968). There are two main forms of pseudo-communication in the language classroom: one is the hackneyed repetition of a dialogue or fragments of conversations; the other one, more insidious, is the artificial exchange of questions and answers between teacher and learners, where the questions are not real questions because the questioner knows the answer perfectly well and the answers are consequently more meant as part of a school ritual than as a way of imparting useful information. In the first stages of language learning, it is not always possible to avoid pseudo-communication completely but ways must be found to provide as many

opportunities as possible for real communication. The best way is to take learner-centredness at its face value and develop the learners' responsibility and autonomy from the very beginning. The surest guarantee of complete failure would be to create the illusion that after a painful boring phase of gathering information and some artificial practice of the foreign language fluent and efficient language use would suddenly appear and allow the learner to be a good communicator. Quoting W Rivers again, we must not deceive ourselves with the idea that "skill using" will follow naturally after a long period of pure "skill getting". The two should be carried on simultaneously. In other words, learning a language for communication is best achieved through communication as a way of learning rather than as a consequence. That does not mean that all classroom activities will always be communicative: some exercises will be needed to create or reinforce some basic skills. But it implies that learners will be trained from the very beginning to communicate with their peers as often as possible to ask for information and express personal ideas and feelings. The traditional teacher-learner dialogue between one who knows and has the privilege of asking questions and thirty learners who are only allowed to answer questions or required to repeat is the very type of situation that cannot be maintained in a communicative approach.

The communicative approach, in my experience, has often led to two misunderstandings that must be dispelled. One is the idea that a communicative syllabus (with functions and notions and lists of speech acts, corresponding to various situations and topics and language needs) can only correspond to very elementary types of exchanges of a survival nature (How to find one's way in a town, Where can one buy a medicine? Is there a restaurant in the neighbourhood? etc). That is of course completely wrong except that it can probably be accounted for from the fact that a "threshold level", as the phrase suggests, only refers to the first unit of a projected "unit credit system", is *not* a complete syllabus and only provides material for the building of syllabuses.

When a country like mine decided to promote a communicative approach for the teaching of English throughout the seven years of secondary education, it used the Threshold Level's framework as a convenient tool, providing all the necessary additions to make it suit its wider purpose and scope, taking into account Jan van Ek's warning in his *Threshold Level for Schools* that the content was meant only "to enable learners to survive, linguistically speaking, in temporary contacts with foreign-language speakers in everyday situations." (van Ek, 1976)

The second misunderstanding is in fact connected with the first one. A communicative approach is often considered to be referring exclusively to oral communication and more specially everyday conversations. There again the misconception may be partly due to the fact that in *The Threshold Level* "The language activities were to be especially oral communication". We are now

better aware, through the development of discourse analysis, of the kind of communication which takes place, silently, between writer and reader, whatever the kind of written document, be it a novel, a magazine article or an advertisement. H Widdowson has shown convincingly that any author of a written text makes use of "interactional procedures which are identical with those typical of spoken conversation. Yet the absence of immediate interaction necessitates a different mode of exploitation". (Widdowson, 1984).

Seen in that perspective, the exploitation of a written text in class can give birth to a variety of interesting activities where learners play the prominent part, taking the initiative of analysing the text, of questioning it, as it were, with the teacher working as a resource person. The silent elements of communication in the text can be made explicit, with different interpretations according to various readers. An information gap can easily be created, with different parts of the text being read by several groups. Anticipation techniques can be encouraged in different ways, starting with the title (and subtitle) and any informative illustration to make reasonable guesses about the general content, then using the first paragraph in the same way. Some texts will lend themselves easily to a "jigsaw puzzle" by having various groups in the class reading different paragraphs and then enquiring from other groups to reconstruct the whole text. The artificial character of the exercise is usefully balanced by the naturalness of the interactive situation created.

COMMUNICATION VERSUS CULTURE?

The question must be answered because the two aspects have often been considered to be antagonistic ever since an effort was made to help learners become communicators in the foreign language.

In our old guidelines for language teachers in France, the basic aim for the first three years was said to be "practical", which meant learning about the language to become capable of understanding simple sentences and of producing similar utterances when asked to do so. At a later stage, in the final years of secondary education, the objective became "cultural" and the foreign culture was understood to be literature. With the introduction of our audio-visual methodology in the sixties, we succeeded in making the "practical" stage much closer to a communicative approach. But the decision to concentrate on everyday conversations both for oral practice and as reading material made it difficult, except through pictures and listening to native speakers, to give any real insight into the foreign culture in its wider meaning (all significant aspects of a human community's ways of life, traditions, craftsmanship, artistic production (including literature), scientific and technological achievements, religion, etc).

The communicative approach, with its emphasis on face to face interaction

in everyday situations, notably at threshold level as we have pointed out, reinforced the idea that whenever learners are trained to communicate, the foreign culture is being sacrificed to that goal.

In all fairness, one must recognize that the criticism is sometimes justified by the excesses of those I like to call "extremists of communication" who are so keen on having their students communicate that they simply forget to give food to their communication, I mean meaningful topics. And when learning a foreign language no topic is more meaningful than one of the aspects of the foreign culture which I have just suggested.

What we must realize is that there is no intrinsic contradiction between communication and culture provided the material used as a basis for discussion of any cultural aspect is well suited to the age and interests and communicative competence of the learners. Of course, the more competent they become, the easier it is to find a huge variety of suitable texts or visual or audiovisual documents between which one can select the most appropriate and build up interesting classroom activities. In my workshop I will be suggesting activities for advanced level students, in connection with science fiction.

For that reason, I would like to refer now to much younger learners and propose a little poem by Shel Siverstein recently published in FORUM:(1)

Homework Machine

The Homework Machine, oh the Homework Machine,
Most perfect contraption that's ever been seen.
Just put in your homework, then drop in a dime,
Snap on the switch, and in ten seconds' time,
Your home work comes out, quick and clean as can be.
Here it is --- "nine plus four?" and the answer is "three".
Three?
Oh me...
I guess it's not as perfect
As I thought it would be.

One can easily imagine splitting the poem into two equal parts, for pedagogic purposes.

Yet before inviting the class either to read or listen to the first part of the poem as read by a native boy or girl, one could draw upon their imaginative power by just giving the title and thus initiating lively interaction on what a

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(1) *Vol. XXVII Number I January 1989*

"homework machine" might be. The anticipation stage would create sufficient curiosity about the content of the poem for the children to be anxious to read it or listen to it to discover the extraordinary machine. The second part, ending with the user's expression of disappointment about the new gadget being "not as perfect as he thought" will then provide a transition to discussing concrete examples of all the wonderful machines and devices which can make life easier in industrialized countries, although they also have their drawbacks. Developing a balanced appreciation of sophisticated technologies may, already at the level of young beginners in the learning of EFL, constitute a worthwhile outcome of some cultural and general educational value. As one reaches higher levels of performance and communicative competence, the cultural element can easily become more important through documents with much richer contents, whether purely informative (newspapers and magazine articles) or belonging to literature.

At all levels, it is clear that a communicative objective is no obstacle to a cultural one which can best contribute to making the communication more rewarding, especially when the students are efficiently encouraged to express their own views on every topic discussed, orally as well as in a written form, when suitable.

STRENGTHENING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE THROUGH A CONSTANT DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE AWARENESS

Teaching and learning a language for communication does not imply that all classroom activities should aim at developing a communicative competence without making sure that students understand the way the foreign language works.

Many writers in the field of language teaching have insisted on the necessity of building up a degree of language awareness while giving ample opportunity to practise genuine communication in natural or simulated situations.

Pit Corder can be quoted here quite appropriately:

> "Learning is seen as fundamentally an inductive process but one which can be controlled and facilitated by descriptions and explanations given at the appropriate moment and formulated in a way which is appropriate to the maturity, knowledge and sophistication of the learner". (Corder, 1973)

Besse and Porquier more recently, in a book devoted to grammar and language didactics, asserted that "It would be hazardous to assert that communi-

cating actively or interacting intensively in a language class is enough to ensure that the foreign grammar is acquired, as a sort of bonus." (Besse and Porquier, 1984, quoted in Girard, et al 1988).

What these authors do not clearly indicate is in what way the necessary acquisition of grammar is going to take place if the "inductive process" triggered by the practice of communication is not enough. When Pit Corder suggests "descriptions and explanations given at the appropriate moment", one may fear that the teacher should indulge in a teacher-centred grammar lesson instead of just helping the students, when the need arises, to observe, describe and justify the way the foreign language works to express this or that notion, as compared for instance to how the same or a similar meaning is expressed by the mother tongue or any other language. That is the way French teachers of English are advised to do it by our recent syllabus and guidelines for secondary schools: "Pupils should, from time to time, be invited to think about the grammatical or even the linguistic implications".

Discovering how the foreign language works is one of our three fundamental objectives throughout the seven years of learning EFL in our schools, the other two being developing a communicative competence (as a first priority) and learning about foreign cultures. The three objectives are felt to be connected, inasmuch as each of the three has the power to strengthen the other two.

One could give many examples of the way students can be invited to pay attention to how English grammar gives users of the language (speakers and writers) the means to express various "semantico-grammatical categories" (using D Wilkins's phrase in his book already quoted, *Notional Syllabuses*).

I will illustrate my point by using a short extract from a book by Laurie Lee, a British author who is very popular with French teachers of English and textbook writers because of his simple language, sense of humour and his lively exploitation of childhood memories. In the following passage, Laurie Lee tells his readers about his girlfriend Ellie: it is a first love story of special interest to young teenagers in their fourth year of English study:

> Then one evening Ellie said her mum and dad had gone away for a week and left her in charge of the houvery act seemed ordained by legend. I saw the open window above my head and started climbing the spout towards it. What would happen when
> I leapt into the room and confronted the sleeping girl? Would she gasp with pleasure and open her arms, cry for mercy, or lose her reason?
>
> Laurie Lee ("First Love" in *I Can't Stay Long*, A Deutsch, 1975)

The extract is meant as listening material, being recorded by a native speaker. After listening to the whole story (from which I have only quoted two paragraphs), the class will usually pick out the factual elements in their own

words drawing upon the linguistic and functional contents of the text, with the help of their teacher. Temporal relations play a very important part in such a story which is told in the simple past but with reference to previous events and to what is going to happen next. They will provide good opportunities for communicative activities making full use of various verb forms. Nobody would deny that such activities are an essential element of the learning process. The question is whether they are sufficient to make the students aware of the grammatical and semantic rules which govern the foreign language. My contention is that after these practical activities, a little amount of time spent on an and to what is going to happen next. They will provide good opportunities for communicative activities making full use of various verb forms. Nobody would deny that such activities are an essential element of the learning process. The question is whether they are sufficient to make the students aware of the grammatical and semantic rules which govern the foreign language. My contention is that after these practical activities, a little amount of time spent on analysing how the language works will ensure better understanding and memorisation.

In the two paragraphs by Laurie Lee, for instance, the teacher may ask the class to pick out all the verb forms alluding to events which have not yet taken place and therefore, in a story about past events, represent "the future in the past". The students will then have to account for each of the items discovered, in particular for the difference in meaning between "It *was going to be* lovely" (with the added sense introduced by "going to") and "she'*d sleep* in the big brass bed" or "What *would happen*...?" The verb form "leapt" in the sentence "What would happen when I *leapt* into the room..?" offers an excellent opportunity to have the students give some thought to the use of some words beyond the usual grammatical function with which they are normally connected. The context makes it clear that the past form of the verb "to leap" does not always refer to an event in the past. In the sentence, it expresses an imaginary action in the future, which exists only in the hero's mind. Other examples could be found by the students in connection with the verb "to wish". A translation into the mother tongue (French in our case) would show that other languages will use the same verb form in the two clauses ("Qu'arriverait-il quand je sauterais dans la chambre?"). Pointing out similarities and differences between the first language and the target language can be a great help in the learning process. Language awareness also has undeniable cultural and educational value, which is another good reason not to neglect it.

One should not, of course, overdo it and spend too much time teaching about the language. Using the language in a variety of communicative activities must remain a central goal. That is why I suggested inviting the class to observe language features at work in the text only *after* they have communicated about the content of the text. In the case of the extract by Laurie Lee which I have been using, it would be a mistake to interrupt the story, as I have done, with the

suspense created by the hero's questions ("What would happen...?") to have the class study the language forms of the text. The suspense must be fully exploited communicatively, to imagine Ellie's reactions and then discover the real end of the story which I must now give you, so that you do not feel too frustrated:

> "... I wanted to kneel to her then, first to worship, then to love. A floorboard creaked. Ellie stirred, then dreamily turned towards me.
> "Oh, no! Not *you* again, really! Arnold(2), you bad, bad boy ..."

As a conclusion, I would like to quote what we wrote in our Council of Europe study on syllabuses (Girard, et al 1988):

> "Learning a foreign language is an opportunity to acquire new skills which extend those acquired in the study of the mother tongue: being able to analyse or observe rules of grammar, appraising, forming an opinion, learning to analyse and synthetise, all this can be improved by learning a foreign language...
>
> The communicative approach does not mean abandoning cultural syllabuses ... Communicating should be taken in its widest sense: learning a foreign language is to come into contact with a new culture... Provided they are selected and apportioned in the interests of the child, cultural elements provide an excellent springboard for communication."

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(2) Laurie's best friend

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